

What is the Relation of Neoliberalism and the Liberal Script?

Anne Menzel

Neoliberalism is not just economic market radicalism. It is a version of the liberal script and definitely belongs to liberal traditions. Among other things, neoliberal scholars and policymakers share liberals' enthusiasm for creating responsible individuals who do not rely on others but provide for themselves and their dependents. The hard work and determination contributed by such responsible individuals – to whose unequal material conditions (neo)liberals pay little, if any attention – are seen as key for economic development and progress.



1 NOT JUST ABOUT THE ECONOMY AND NOT SEPARATE

Discussions about neoliberalism at SCRIPTS have often centred around notions of separating neoliberalism – usually understood as economic market fundamentalism – from more moderate liberalism proper. My intention in this *SCRIPTS Arguments* piece is to offer a caveat. I want to emphasize two well-established points that merit consideration.

The first is that neoliberalism is not just an economic theory or a set of economic policies. It also entails socio-political projects, and these are just as important to neoliberal scholars and policymakers as economic measures and reforms – if we even want to think in terms of strictly separated spheres. As Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe point out, neoliberals themselves have “thought of the political and economic spheres as not being separate” (Slobodian/Plehwe 2020: 5). For example, neoliberal family politics have often been concerned with creating “units” of responsibility that would shield the state – and ultimately capital – from demands for publicly financed health care, quality education, unemployment benefits

etc. The project of rendering these “social issues” family responsibilities may not in itself be economic but is expected to promote a society in which capital is better protected (cf. Cooper 2017: ch. 3).

The second point is that it is not only difficult but also futile to try to strictly separate neoliberalism from liberalism or the liberal script. Such a separation would be misleading both in terms of intellectual history – considering that neoliberalism emerged out of efforts to revive liberalism (Biebricher 2015: 256-257) – and also in terms of ideological “substance”. For example, Quinn Slobodian has argued that liberals and neoliberals have been concerned with the same problem, namely that of protecting capital(ism) under conditions of democracy: “The normative neoliberal world is not a borderless market without states but a doubled world kept safe from mass demands for social justice and redistributive equality by the guardians of the economic constitution” (Slobodian 2018: 16).¹ Moreover, both liberalism and neoliberalism share a passion for the empowered individual who can lift herself up and contribute to progress through determination and hard work (cf. Dawson/Francis 2015: 26; Calkin 2015: 298-299).

To emphasize these two points – that neoliberalism is not just about the economy and belongs to liberal traditions – I am going to draw attention to the importance of the family and female empowerment in ideas and policies that have been categorized as neoliberal. I make use of available scholarship, such as Melinda Cooper’s fantastic book *Family Values* (2017) and draw on some of my work on “girls’ empowerment” in the context of so-called development cooperation (Menzel 2019; Fofana Ibrahim et al. 2021).

2 “THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY...”

Many readers will be familiar with this line from Margaret Thatcher, which she delivered in an interview for *Women’s Own* in September 1987 – shortly after she won her third term in office. In this interview, Thatcher argued that, unfortunately, people still expected the government to solve their everyday problems, thereby casting them upon society. Then she asked, “who is

¹ More on this common ground between neoliberalism and liberalism can be found in an excellent The Dig interview with Quinn Slobodian, “A History of Neoliberalism w/ Quinn Slobodian”, 27 August 2022, starting at 1:00:50, <https://thedigradio.com/podcast/a-history-of-neoliberalism-w-quinn-slobodian/> (last accessed 9 March 2023).

society?” and answered, “There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first”.²

The idea that not only self-interested individuals but also families are real and important entities is widely shared among neoliberal thinkers and policymakers. And this is why, in the words of Melinda Cooper (also from an interview), “When you look at the works of American neoliberals, they are screaming family politics from every page.”³ This neoliberal regard for the family is the topic of Cooper’s book *Family Values* (2017), in which she analyses developments in the US from the 1970s up until the 1990s with a focus on differences and alliances between neoliberals and neoconservatives. Regarding the neoliberals, Cooper mostly focuses on university-based scholars, while the neoconservatives are often politicians and policymakers (such as Ronald Reagan). One of the key points Cooper emphasizes is that neoliberals have been just as interested in the family as neoconservatives – but for different reasons and in different ways.

For neoliberals, the family is or should be a space where individuals accept and practice responsibility for one another so that family members do not have to rely on the government in times of crisis because the family (or the responsible provider within the family) takes care of them. The family is imagined as a special type of entity in this regard because it (somehow) allows for altruism among otherwise self-interested and benefit maximizing individuals. This is how the family and especially marriage might be made into an institution to protect the state and ultimately capital from undue demands (Cooper 2017: ch. 3). Focusing on Chicago school neoliberals in the 1980s and 1990s, Cooper points out that such high regard for the family and marriage went hand in hand with ideas to decriminalize drugs and prostitution and even with some very early support for same-sex marriage – and all of this during an escalating AIDS crisis in the US (Cooper 2017: ch. 5). Obviously, neoliberal support for marriage and the family was not at all grounded in conservative ideas about sexual morality.

2 The full interview is available at the Thatcher Foundation’s online archive <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> (last accessed 15 March 2023).

3 The Dig interview with Melinda Cooper, “Family Values with Melinda Cooper”, 27 December 2020, at 12:14, <https://thedigradio.com/podcast/family-values-with-melinda-cooper-2/?query=Melinda> (last accessed 9 March 2023).

These neoliberal stances famously impressed Michel Foucault who talked about them in his lectures on biopolitics in the late 1970s and who had some sympathies for Chicago school neoliberals and described their work as “antinormative” (Dean 2014). It appears that Foucault did not recognize the normativity inherent in these stances, possibly because their normativity differed from traditional or conservative normativity. As Cooper puts it, “The antinormativity of Chicago school neoliberalism is contingent upon a moral philosophy of prudential risk management that leaves no excess costs to the state” (Cooper 2017: 175). In other words: people should be able to do whatever they want as long as they do not ask for government money in case of injury. The idea was that withholding a public social safety net and responsabilizing the nuclear family should teach people to value risk-aversion and, in practice, incentivise them to avoid risks. This imaginary did not remain confined to academic and theoretical discussions. For example, it clearly informed arguments made in favour of same-sex marriage at the California State Supreme Court where it was argued that “marital and family relationships relieve society of the obligation of caring for individuals who may become incapacitated” (Cooper 2017: 213).

All of this may sound “typically neoliberal”, a relentless and heartless responsabilization of individuals and their non-economic relations of love and care. But the normative notion that a proper person is one who is a prudent and responsible provider stands in a much longer and liberal tradition – which would suggest a continuum rather than a break with liberalism.

For example, in his book *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea*, historian Tyler Stovall highlights that 19th and early 20th century liberals in Europe and the US were obsessed with public education as a means to civilize people so that they would become capable of being “free” in a prudent and responsible manner – not like children or “savages” who lacked capacities to either control themselves or provide for dependents (Stovall 2021: ch. 1). In a similar vein, Robbie Shilliam points out that liberal electoral reforms in 19th century Britain enfranchised only such men who were deemed “deserving” because they were able to take care of themselves and their families: “skilled and industrious, settled, small patriarchs” (Shilliam 2018: 43). Much like neoliberalism, liberalism values responsible family providers, even if the focus is not as exclusively or openly on the idea that

their value lies in protecting the state, and ultimately capital, from undue welfare demands.

3 GIRLS CAN DO IT – AGAINST ALL ODDS

Fostering skills for a prudent and responsible life is also the focus of contemporary “girls’ empowerment” as a strategy for socio-economic development in the Global South. Major bi- and multilateral donors such as USAID, the UK’s development department, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank have been promoting and funding girls’ empowerment for at least the last fifteen years (Moeller 2018: 87-91).

My own research on girls’ empowerment has focused on policies and projects in Sierra Leone in West Africa (Menzel 2019; Ibrahim et al. 2021), yet similar policies and projects can be found throughout the Global South (cf. Moeller 2018; Bessa 2019). They present girls’ empowerment as a matter of life skills training, self-esteem building, and general “sensitization”, including awareness raising about women’s and children’s rights. For example, the current girls’ empowerment policy in Sierra Leone focuses on the prevention of teenage pregnancy and child marriage in the wake of legal reforms that have criminalized underage sex and underage marriage. This *National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage 2018-2022* also presents itself as belonging to wider efforts to reduce “gender inequality” in Sierra Leone, which the Gender Inequality Index ranks as one of the most unequal countries in the world (Government of Sierra Leone 2018: 11).⁴ In this way, girls empowerment is entangled with classical liberal feminist tropes, such as the idea that emancipation is about (legal) equality between men and women.

Yet the key rationale behind girls’ empowerment policies and projects is the expectation that girls can make a huge difference in poverty reduction – if only they stay in school, stay away from early sex, get the necessary skills to earn a living, and see to it that their own children grow up healthy and get an education. Basically, girls’ empowerment is seen as a relatively cheap and presumably effective way to achieve many of the things deemed

⁴ Policy documents such as the *National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage 2018-2022* are officially authored by the national government but written with the assistance of donor-funded consultants who see to it that donor priorities are written into national policies. In the case of this *National Strategy*, the key consultant was commissioned by UNICEF and collaborated with civil servants and civil society representatives at the Gender Ministry (Menzel 2019: 446).

necessary for poverty reduction. The way it is often put is that there is a “business case” for investing in girls and that investments in Global South girls are expected to yield higher returns than investments in Global South boys (Moeller 2018: 6-12, 34-37). For example, citing studies and international policy documents, Sierra Leone’s first *National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy 2013-2015* put it like this,

When women and girls earn income, they reinvest 90% of it into their families. The impact of investing in girls is intergenerational. A mother with a few years of formal education is considerably more likely to send her children to school, breaking the intergenerational chain of poverty. In many countries each additional year of formal education completed by a mother translates into her children remaining in school for up to an additional one-half year. The choices and opportunities available to adolescent girls will determine in many respects the future of Sierra Leone: whether the cycle of poverty is broken in service of prosperity and security. (Government of Sierra Leone 2015: 9)

But what does all of this have to do with neoliberalism? A number of scholars – including myself – have categorized girls’ empowerment as a neoliberal approach to development (see e.g., Calkin 2015; Menzel 2019; Bessa 2019), as it puts responsibilities for overcoming poverty on the shoulders of Global South girls without also providing material support that would be needed to have a chance to meet these responsibilities. For example, it demands that girls stay in school and abstain from early sex – but does not acknowledge that transactional sex is often how girls acquire the means for staying in school, including money for school or university fees, uniforms, books, lunch, etc. (Menzel 2019: 452-454). As Thais Bessa puts it, empowerment projects inform girls about the “right” choices – and then leave them with “informed powerlessness” (Bessa 2019: 1947). This phrasing strongly resonated with feminist activists in Sierra Leone who saw their own experiences reflected in it, “[I]t’s like, okay, women have to be empowered, you have to know things and you go out of your way to really know things. But when you know things, there is still no enabling environment” (Fofana Ibrahim et al. 2021: 367).

However, categorizing girls’ empowerment as neoliberal really highlights a tendency that is already present in “classical” liberal feminism: namely the blinding out of material conditions for being free, equal, having true agency

etc. Liberal feminism famously constructed an “abstract woman” that was silently modelled on a white middle class woman to make demands as if class and race did not matter to feminism (Kotef 2009). At least for me, categorizing girls’ empowerment as neoliberal was never intended to separate it from this longer, liberal tradition. Rather, calling it neoliberal served to connect with broader discussions about contemporary inequality and injustice. For purposes of adequate ideological categorization, the “neo” is probably unnecessary.

4 CLOSING REMARKS

In sum, why is it important to recognize that neoliberal thought and practice are not only about the economy and that neoliberalism belongs to liberal traditions? These two points provide a caveat against wanting to see neoliberalism as just some sort of radical market fundamentalism, a nasty sibling to more moderate and reasonable liberalism proper. It is true that neoliberalism escalates certain tendencies within liberalism – but these are matters of degree. Recognizing continuities allows us to see liberalism more completely, including its pronounced tendencies towards ignoring and blinding out inequalities and injustices. Without seeing these continuities, there is the danger of falling into the trap of wanting to construct a “good” liberalism, which supposedly has nothing to do with “bad” neoliberalism.

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